

Endurance

November 6, 2006

The first word in the Ovada Patimokkha, which was the Buddha's first summary of his teachings, is patience. *Khanti* is the Pali word. It covers patience, forbearance, endurance, tolerance. The Buddha gives it prime importance because it's essential for everything in the path. You have to learn how to endure unpleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations if you want to be generous, if you want to observe the precepts, and if you want to meditate.

Take the precepts, for example. There are certain things you want to do: You get angry at something someone else has said, and you want to get back at them. So you lie or steal or kill, because you can't endure what that person said or did. In the end, your precepts get shredded to bits. The same with concentration practice: If you try to focus on one thing but can't endure anything else that's happening or coming into your range of awareness, you'll never settle down.

So no matter how uncomfortable or irritating things may be, you have to learn how to put them aside and choose what to focus on. Then make up your mind you're going to stay there no matter what. This way, you can be withdrawn from unskillful mental qualities, withdrawn from sensual desires, which is the beginning of right concentration. You pull yourself out of those mind states by learning not to get irritated.

The same with discernment: You have to see which forms of stress are things that you simply have to put up with in life, and which ones you can change. If you can't put up with the effects of inconstancy, stress, and not self, you'll never get to focus on what the real problems are—which is not the fact that those things that are inconstant, stressful, and not-self. They're not the problem. The mind is the problem. Your craving, your ignorance: Those are the problems. And to focus on those, you have to learn how to be tolerant and patient.

The question of which things are the most important ones to be patient about and which are the most difficult to tolerate will vary from person to person. We all have our different strengths and weaknesses. So when you see that someone else is weak in a particular area, don't look down on them for that. Some people are physically very strong and can put up with all kinds of physical hardships, but one word can really set them off. As Ajaan Maha Boowa likes to say, another person's words are just the breeze of that other person's voice—a gentle thing, you hardly feel the breeze coming out of their mouth, you hardly feel the sound waves,

but the words can penetrate into your heart. So learn to look at them just as the breeze from someone else's voice.

Other people are mentally strong. They're not swayed by what other people say, but physically they may be weak. They have trouble dealing with physical irritations.

So each of us has to focus on his or her own weaknesses, and not on the weaknesses of others. Don't make fun of the weaknesses of others, because you have work to do inside. There's an area in the mind where you have to learn to be intolerant.

When the Buddha talks about the various ways of training the mind, there are some areas where you are tolerant, specifically of things that come from outside: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas you hear from other people, ideas that come up in your mind. But you have to be intolerant of anything unskillful that comes up in your mind. You have to tell yourself you're not going to give in to it.

Or you can think of it as a variety of tolerance or endurance. You endure the feeling that you want to say or do something that's unskillful, but you don't give in to it. When you see an unskillful mental state coming up in your mind, you've got to deal with it as quickly as possible. The image in the Canon is of someone whose head is on fire. Imagine yesterday's fire, if it were actually on your head, and how quickly you'd try to put it out.

So in that sense, the Buddha teaches lack of tolerance. He says not to tolerate those states. You don't give in to them. As they say in Thai, you don't keep a stable of them and feed them. One good image that the Buddha gives is of making your mind like earth. The earth isn't disturbed by things that happen around it. You can throw disgusting things on the earth, and the earth doesn't shrink away. You can pour perfume on the earth, and the earth doesn't get excited. That's a symbol for the ability to tolerate things that are normally hard to endure. Hold that image in mind and you'll find that what you're actually doing is focusing on one spot of your awareness that you can tolerate, where things are going well.

This is why it's so important when you meditate that you get a sense of ease, at least one spot in the body where you can stay at home, stay at your ease, be comfortable. Let all the irritating things be someplace else. You don't have to go getting involved with them. You don't have put yourself in the line of fire. If they're shooting bullets, put yourself in the line of the bullets.

So the Buddha's not telling you just to endure. He's saying to find a strategy so that the mind doesn't start feeding on the things that get it worked up, so that you can create a sense of solidity inside. When the mind is really focused, when it's

really one, then even though other things may be coming into your awareness, you don't have to go and get involved with them. As Ajaan Chah used to say, it's not that sounds disturb you. You're disturbing the sounds. You're going around making a comment on all these things that disturb you.

So just keep that sense of solidity, lack of disturbance in the mind. Try to focus all your awareness there. As for the things that are disturbing, just let them pass, pass, pass. As for unskillful mind-states that may come in, you let those pass as well. You don't feed them. You don't encourage them. Often you'll find with these things that simply letting them go is enough to get them to go away on their own.

There are times, though, when you do have to analyze why you have a particular penchant for getting upset about what someone has said, or about physical discomfort or whatever the disturbance is; why you have a penchant for greed, anger, and delusion. In case like that, you really have to analyze the causes. The image of being solid like the earth won't be able to do all the work that needs to be done. But it helps get you through an awful lot.

There are other useful reflections as well, like the one I mentioned this afternoon: the monk who was going to a difficult place where people were pretty savage. The Buddha said, "What if those people curse you?"

"Well," the monk, "I'll remind myself that at least they're not hitting me."

"What if they hit you?"

"At least they're not stoning me."

"What if they stone you?"

"At least they're not stabbing me."

"What if they stab you?"

"At least they're not killing me."

"What if they kill you?"

"At least my death wasn't a suicide."

If you can learn how to think like that, you can learn to endure an awful lot.

So learn to put up with the things you have to put up with, so that you can focus on curing the real problem, which is the problem of the mind. Focus on your own weaknesses, and not on the irritating weaknesses of other people. That kind of focus is what keeps you in line with the Dhamma. You're practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma: for the sake of your own dispassion. And that principle, as the Buddha said, is what guarantees that there will continue to be enlightened people in the world.